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ABSTRACT

Poets' working drafts and their comments on their processes indicate overwhelmingly that they, like experienced writers of other genres, are extensive revisers. The biggest difficulty with the term "revising" is that it designates both the changes made to a text and the mental processes and attitudes that underlie these changes. Even the nineteenth century poets who described their process of writing as spontaneous (Shelley, for example) left manuscripts that are heavily reworked. In the twentieth century poets' working papers, as well as their individual comments, testify to the extensive nature of their revising process. Poetic revision appears to entail deletion rather than addition--a process of tightening rather than elaboration. While poets revise both internally, for themselves, and externally, for a reader, this dichotomy is most appropriate for describing the process of moving a text from expressive into transactional, rather than into poetic, discourse. To account for the poetic dimension of revision, a three-part rather than a two-part model is needed. Poets revise not only to discover what they know, or to communicate this to an audience, but to uncover what the poem knows. Poets play with words and are extensive revisers precisely because they are fascinated by language. (NKA)

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The Poetic Dimensions of Revision

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Most of the action in composing process research takes place at the transactional end of the discourse continuum. Nearly all composing process studies investigate transactional writing, usually impromptu essays assigned by researchers themselves. The field has made enormous progress toward describing the processes writers engage in to produce text, yet because there is little work in poetic writing, a number of questions are virtually unexplored. What are the differences between transactional and poetic writing processes? Are writing problems discourse specific? Is there generic variation in the development of writing abilities? What can be learned by studying the processes of those we refer to as "creative writers"?

Interest in these kinds of questions prompted me to undertake a large-scale investigation of poets' composing processes. Today, I'll report on some of my findings on the nature of poetic revision. Since kinds of discourse do not appear to fall into discrete categories but occur on a continuum, we can expect to find poetic processes underlying not only poetry, but to a lesser degree, transactional writing as well. By studying the writing processes of poets we can most clearly view the poetic dimension of revising, a view that will help make our understanding of the revising process more complete.

Poetry is uniquely ill-suited for the kinds of experimental writing situations created by researchers investigating other forms. Lyric poems are almost never written on assignment; furthermore, my interest in poetry as it is produced under usual circumstances, in self-initiated poetry writing, made an ex-

perimental design inappropriate. I used instead a descriptive methodology, collecting and analyzing information about poets' processes from a number of sources. I conducted case studies of a novice and an experienced poet and analyzed six poets' working papers. Additional material came from published manuscript studies. Like the other members of this panel, my primary sources of information were writers' self-reports, in this case poets' commentary on their processes in poems, letters, interviews, recorded conversations and prose works.

As data, self-reports require special handling. They can be imprecise, or contradictory. Writers are often accused of lying about their processes and sometimes writers discredit their own accounts. I have found it possible to glean useful information about composing from self-reports by viewing them contextually, looking at not only what poets say about composing, but at the audience they address and the form of discourse in which their statements appear.

Self-reports <u>are</u> contradictory, but in part this is because we take them from such a variety of rhetorical situations. We cannot expect from an extemporaneous, public interview, the same, careful description of writing processes we might find in poets' written commentary on composing. Observations about writing in poems need to be evaluated in terms of the demands on the poet for writing a poem, demands that may supercede those of the explication of writing processes. Notes appended to poems, such as Coleridge's explanation of how he composed "Kubla Khan," need to be viewed in their context, as part of the literary work

itself, part of the vision, or fiction, of the poem. We would not expect poets to speak to a public audience in a general essay on poetics precisely as they might speak in a private letter commenting on their own writing processes. An interview conducted by a talk show host and one conducted by a composition researcher will likely produce two quite different responses from poets. Self-reports offer a rich source of information about writing but to evaluate self-reports we need to consider them not as isolated statements aobut writing, but as statements made in the context of specific rhetorical situations, appropriate to a specific genre of discourse, addressed to a specific audience.

When we check self-reports against writers' working papers we have even more useful data. This was one of my purposes for conducting case studies and manuscript studies. Mimi Schwartz' research provides this kind of information about writers of several genres including poetry. Alberta Turner's collection of commentary and drafts from fifty poets is a good source of raw material for studying how poets write. Working papers become particulary important when we turn our attention to revision.

The word, revising, like the word, composing, stands for several aspects of writing at once. Composition must be one of very few fields that can be justifiably criticized for not having enough of its own jargon. Revision designates a sub-process of composing; it is itself an overall process that includes editing as one of its sub-processes. Some researchers, like Donald Murray,

call revision everything a writer does after completing a first draft; others, like Linda Flower and John Hayes consider revision to be a dimension of reviewing that occurs throughout the writing process. The biggest difficulty with the term is that it identifies both the changes made to a text and the mental processes and attitudes that underlie these changes. Although text development and cognition go on simultaniously, in the interest of clarity, researchers usually talk about them one at a time. Let us look first at revisions in the text.

Poets' working drafts and their comments on their processes indicate overwhelmingly that poets, like experienced writers of other genres, are extensive revisers. Some poets, particularly in the nineteenth century, describe their process of writing as "spontaneous." But even these poets left manuscripts that are heavily reworked. Shelley, for example, wrote that it is "an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study." Yet, as Neville Rogers points out, multiple versions of many of Shelley's poems indicate the effort of revision they underwent. And Shelley himself in a private letter remarked, "The source of poetry is nature and voluntary, but requires severe labor in its development."

In this century poets' working papers, as well as their comments, testify to the extensive nature of their revising processes. Said Ezra Pound, "Any damn fool can be spontaneous." Robert Lowell tells us he revised "endlessly," Paul Valery, that every poem is "abandoned rather than finished." W.D. Snodgrass' first response to my question, "how do you write a poem" was "revise, revise,

revise, revise."

However, beginning poets, like beginning writers of other genres, appear to revise very little. Interestingly, when experienced, transactional writers begin to write poetry, they most often behave like inexperienced writers. Their drafts do not look like the heavily reworked drafts of published poets. Finding that poets are extensive revisiers, we have one more piece of evidence to add to that of studies like Nancy Sommers' which indicate that experienced writers work from an abundance of material. The writing processes of beginning poets suggest that the difficulty of working in an unfamiliar genre may affect even an experienced writer's ability to revise.

I found it useful to apply to poetry the same system of classifying revisions that Sommers used for essays, Chomsky's categories of grammatical transformations: addition, deletion, substitution and rearrangement. Unlike other classification systems, these categories are so broad they seem to be applicable to any genre and might even be used to classify revisions made to visual works of art or to musical compositions.

Using this system, the most striking pattern I found in poetry manuscripts was the preponderance of revision by deletion. Lyric poets seem to write through a process of tightening rather than of elaboration. Poets appear to draft freely and then to refine what they have drafted. Naturally, such a broad generalization cannot hold for all poets writing all of their poems. Yet, all the poems in my collection of working papers, as well as much evidence in published commentary on manuscript collections,

points to a revising pattern primarily of deletion and tightening.

I should say that this tightening process is most apparent in free verse. In traditional verse, substitution seems to be the most recurrent revising move. A poet writing a sonnet, for example, may use the verse form itself as a scaffold on which to build and replace words of the poem. Early drafts of traditional forms are often composed in the same format as the finished versions: a complete sonnet, villanelle, and so on. Free verse poetry is literally shaped during the process of revising.

Poets demonstrate in their revisions an ability to pare down their drafts, and yet to resist closure on them. Poets continue to make changes in the text beyond the point at which revision seems to be needed for the sake of clarity. To understand some of the thinking behind these changes we will look at a few of the findings of this study on the cognitive dimension of revision.

Donald Murray's work provides a natural starting place for discussing the mental processes entailed in revising. His theory, in a sense, underlies other researchers explanations of the process. Murray identifies two kinds of revision: internal and external. During internal revision we revise for ourselves, to discover what we want to say. During external revision we revise to more clearly communicate what we have discovered to an outside audience. Murray quotes novelists and poets who report on the discovery process in revising. Adrienne Rich says, "Poems are like dreams; you put into them what you don't know you know." Charles Simic writes, "You never know when you begin a poem what

it has in store for you."

My study of poets' processes suggests that while poets do revise both internally, for themselves, and externally, for a reader, this dichotomy is most appropriate for describing the process of moving a text from expressive into transactional, rather than into poetic discourse. To account for the poetic dimension of revision, it appears we need a three-part rather than a two-part model. Poetic writers revise not only to discover what they know, or to communicate this to an audience, but to uncover what the poem knows.

During a case study interview with the poet, Barry Spacks, Spacks explained the revisions to one of his poems this way:

> There is a pressure to let the poem say what it wants to say. In a sense what you are after is integrity for the poem. You want the poem to be its full self and only its full self. You don't want it to be a used car salesman to the reader; you want your poem to have a dignity of its real presense. So the trick here was not so much to reach out to the reader; the trick is to invest your poem with its appropriate characteristics so that it can be fully there for the reader. And I think it is on that basis you make your adjustments.

Similarly, Allan Tate writes, "These revisions were not undertaken for the convenience of the reader but for the poem's own clarity, so that word, phrase, line, passage, the poem might at worst come near its best expression." Phyllis Bartlett, who

investigated the reasons for revision among dozens of modern poets, concludes, "The sensible, skeletal view of poetic revision is focused on the poem itself. This attitude more than any other underlies the efforts of most poets in their revising."

Rather than revising internally to discover what one wishes to say, or revising externally to convey information to a reader, the poet must do a third kind of revising, what can be called "aesthetic revising." In this kind of revision the writer's purpose is neither to clarify nor to communicate ideas, but to refine and develop the text as a work of art.

To be able to revise in this way the poet must begin to read the draft as lyric poetry, or another genre, is read. Among theories of reading processes for literary texts, Louise Rosenblatt's theory is particularly useful to the study of poets' revising. Rosenblatt explains that we either do "efferent reading," for information, the way we read transactional texts, or "aesthetic reading," for the experience of reading itself, the way we read poetic texts. The following description from Rosenblatt's account of how we read poetry seems appropriate for describing the process of reading during the writing of poetry as well.

> To produce a poem, the reader had to pay attention to the broader gamut of what these particular words in this particular order were calling forth within him: attention to the sound and rhythm of the imprints of past encounters with these words and their referents in differing life and literary context,

> attention to the overtones of feeling, the chiming of sound, sense, idea, and association. Sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking under the stimulus of the words, the reader who adopts the aesthetic attitude feels no compulsion other than to apprehend what goes on during this process, to concentrate on the complex structure of experience that he is shaping and that becomes for him the poem.

The reader who is also the writer of the text feels a "compulsion" not only to apprehend the text in the way Rosenblatt describes, but also to revise the text, as Allan Tate said, to make it "come near its best expression." Poets are able to revise aesthetically, viewing the text as a poem rather than as information to be discovered or conveyed because they read the text aesthetically, as a poem.

And yet, we do not read a poem entirely aesthetically, nor is a transactional text devoid of poetic elements. While aesthetic revision may be most clearly visible in the writing processes of lyric poets, transactional writers, to a lesser degree, do aesthetic revising as well. The difference between enlivened prose and competent but prosaic writing may in part depend on the writer's ability to revise for poetic elements, for the rhythm and sound of the words, to be able to play with language as poets do, to treat the text as something more than a vehicle for efficiently transmitting information, to treat the text as art.

Differences among kinds of discourse are differences of degree. At the farthest, most poetic end of the continuum, at lyric

poetry, we find, as James Britton tells us, "language that is exists for its own sake." At the opposite, transactional end of the continuum, we find language that attempts to be transparent, a neutral conveyer of information.

Most of writing, however, plays between these two extremes. Perhaps because of the poetic element in expository discourse, many of us, as writing teachers, are uncomfortable with the distinction between "creative writing" and that other writing we teach.

Poets are extensive revisers precisely because they are fascinated by language. As we encourage that attitude toward language in our students, we may want to adopt the stance toward revising that poets seem to take, what Gabriel Della-Pianna in his call for research on poetry writing refers to as "finding what the work itself suggests." Rather than asking students to make their work more stylistically interesting by, for instance, adding more colorful or figurative language, we may want to devise techniques for helping students draw out the poetic elements of writing in their drafts, encourage them to play with words, to develop the ability of poets to sometimes let go of an idea for the sake of finding more interesting ideas emerging in the text, to focus, at times, on the language of the text itself.

As researchers we will need to more thoroughly examine both poetic writers' processes and the poetic element in various forms of discourse to more fully understand the writing process.

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